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FM AMEMBASSY BELGRADE
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INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 BELGRADE 000118

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SR](#)

SUBJECT: PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN ENTERS FINAL STRETCH STILL
NECK-AND-NECK

REF: A) BELGRADE 95 B) BELGRADE 78 C) BELGRADE 111

Summary

¶1. (SBU) In the final week of campaigning, Serbia's two presidential candidates are hot after the votes and each other. President Boris Tadic is taking two campaign messages to the people: A vote for Tadic is a vote for Serbia's European future and economic well-being; and a vote for Radical Party candidate Tomislav Nikolic is a vote for Serbia's dark past. Nikolic, on the defensive, has challenged the President's record on Europe and accused Tadic of negative campaigning. In contrast with the first round of elections, the differences between the candidates is clear. Analysts expect that this polarizing race may spur the largest voter turnout in Serbia's democratic history, and while Tadic is the slight favorite, the outcome may be a photo finish. End Summary.

Tadic on the Offensive

¶2. (U) Serbia's President and Democratic Party (DS) candidate Boris Tadic has taken off the gloves in his fight to retain the presidency against Serbian Radical Party (SRS) candidate Tomislav Nikolic. In a January 26 campaign rally in central Serbia, Tadic held Nikolic accountable for his participation in the regime that brought Serbia misery and isolation in the 1990s. Tadic reminded voters of Nikolic's association with the official leader of the SRS, war crimes indictee Vojislav Seselj, currently on trial in The Hague and said that Seselj, not Nikolic, would run Serbia from prison, if the Radicals won the presidency. Tadic recalled Serbia's bleak past and the Radicals' role in the worst of it, saying that Serbia should never again experience lines for bread and gasoline and electricity rationing.

¶3. (U) Democratic leaders campaigning for Tadic have used the media, especially television, to conjure up the violent images of Serbia under Seselj's lead. In coordination with Nenad Cenak's League of Vojvodina Social Democrats, the DS organized print and internet ads depicting Seselj aiming a gun at dissidents, food lines in Belgrade, and highways teaming with refugees of the previous decade. On January 26, Vuk Draskovic, former Foreign Minister and leader of the Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO), turned his support from first-round New Serbia candidate Velimir Illic and called on SPO members to vote for Tadic in the second round. Draskovic declared his confidence that SPO members knew whom they had fought the past fifteen years and whom they should support now.

With Few Endorsements, Tadic Goes after the Votes

¶4. (SBU) Besides Canak and some Hungarian groups in Vojvodina, few democratic party leaders have officially thrown their party support to Tadic. However, on January 30, the Hungarian Coalition, led by first round presidential candidate Istvan Pasztor, decided to

support Tadic. According to DS insiders, first round Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) presidential candidate Cedomir (Ceda) Jovanovic had not met with the DS to discuss possible support for Tadic. The LDP, however provided some optimism on January 30 when it issued a press release urging party members to vote their conscience on February 3. While falling short of endorsing Tadic, the release said LDP voters are unconditionally pro-European oriented, and that the LDP's values and positions diametrically opposed the values of the Radical party and candidate Tomislav Nikolic. On January 25, Tadic rejected Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica's demand that he sign an annex to the government coalition agreement, stipulating that Serbia would void the Stabilization and Association Agreement if the EU deployed a mission to Kosovo (reftel A). On January 27, FM Jeremic told the Ambassador, that Kostunica's move had angered many DS members. He was "cautiously optimistic," however, that New Serbia leader and coalition partner Velimir Ilic, with whom he has worked closely, would come through and that many if not most of the NS faithful will come out to support Tadic.

Pitching Unity and Europe (as Key to Prosperity)

15. (U) Tadic is pitching his message directly to the over 80% of Serbians who polls say support European integration. At weekend rallies in Novi Pazar and Kraljevo (south central Serbia) (reftel C), Tadic called the presidential elections a competition for the country and its European future. A DS Member of Parliament told poloff on January 30 that Tadic hoped to "hoped to bring down" the level of Radical support in Central Serbia and raise the support of Tadic in this key battleground. Tadic told a crowd of more than 10,000 in predominantly Muslim Novi Pazar that he wanted to bring together the energy of all of Serbia's people of all religions and ethnicities. In a January 26 interview for daily "Danas," Tadic called on voters, regardless of religion, nationality, and party membership to vote in the second round of

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elections and prove that Serbia will not endorse return to the poverty, sanctions, and misery of the 1990s.

Nikolic on Defense

16. (SBU) Nikolic's team has assertively reproached what they cast as Tadic's unfounded scare tactics. At a January 27 press conference, SRS Secretary General Aleksandar Vucic accused Tadic of "leading the dirtiest campaign in Balkan history." "Tadic has shown during the campaign that he has no integrity but has dirty hands...Not even the most expensive and the neatest suit will help Tadic wash off his face and hands," Vucic told local tabloid "Press" on January 30.

17. (SBU) The candidate himself has maintained his avuncular persona. Nikolic spent the weekend visiting new mothers in a maternity ward, promising more generous social services, and stopped at a farmer's market in Zemun, a Radical stronghold just outside of Belgrade, promising support for the common Serb. His broad based message addresses Kosovo, the economy and corruption. "I see people living with hardship, but the government doesn't care. For this reason we must change the government. I see a proud country that they are diminishing, and a President who accepts blackmail. For this reason we should change the President. The Serbia that I know is with all heart for Kosovo, for equality with our international friends, and for better tomorrow for our children. For this reason, Serbia needs a change. Serbia wants a new President. I'm ready for this responsibility with all heart," Nikolic says in one of his ever present television ads.

Turning to Russia

8 (SBU) Continuing his public courtship with the East, Nikolic visited Moscow on January 30 for meetings with the president of the Russian Federation Council Sergey Mironov and Russian Duma Speaker Boris Grizlov. Itar-Tass also reported that Nikolic's delegation included former Yugoslav ambassador to Russia, and Slobodan

Milosevic's brother, Borislav Milosevic. Nikolic was to return just in time for the sole televised debate between the two candidates. His trip to Russia comes just five days after Tadic went to Russia to witness the signing of a bilateral energy deal with Russian energy company Gazprom (Reftel A).

Both Sides Put European Future on Agenda

¶9. (SBU) On the campaign trail, Tadic promotes his bona fides to lead Serbia to its European future. Tadic is promoting the interim agreement on visas, economics and trade, culture, and education that the EU offered on January 28 as an important mile-marker in Serbia's advance toward EU membership. FM Jeremic played up the agreement to media on January 28, calling it "practically an invitation for Serbia to enter the family of European nations." "Serbia will not give up on its European future," Tadic said on January 29. Health Minister Milosavljevic (G17) said he was "cautiously optimistic" that the people of Serbia would understand that things took time and they had to have patience. He didn't seem to be involved in the details of the campaign, other than to say G17 has been stalwart in its support of Tadic.

¶10. (U) Radicals played up the failure of Tadic to deliver the SAA. Vucic said on January 28 that the SRS had anticipated Tadic's "failure" to sign the SAA. Nikolic, he said, "would be a more serious negotiator with the EU and he would achieve better results for Serbia."

GOTV and Possible High Voter Turnout

¶11. (SBU) The Get Out the Vote activity kicked into overdrive, during the final days of campaigning. Center for Free Elections and Democracy (CeSID), European Movement in Serbia, EXIT festival, and the University Student's Association, among others are broadcasting TV and radio commercials calling for massive participation in the second round of the elections. A DS party official confirmed to poloff on January 30 that both the DS and the Radicals are pushing their own Get Out the Vote campaigns as well. International Republican Institute polling analysts told post that the second round voter turnout could exceed an unprecedented and unmanageable 70%. On January 30, CeSID officials gave poloff a similar forecast for voter turnout. While previous election wisdom suggested that increased turnout would favor Tadic, based on the assumption that SRS turnout traditionally peaked and held steady from first to second round, IRI data now suggests that new second-round votes might fall evenly between the two candidates. Perhaps less formal, but just as telling, bookies, considered by some to be the best pollsters in Serbia, have adjusted the odds on the election in Tadic's favor. Tadic is currently "polling" 1:1.40 with this group, compared to 1:2.60 for Nikolic.

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Comment

¶12. (SBU) In the final week of the election campaign, the choice facing Serbian voters is clear. The campaign has made clear massive voter disappointment with Tadic's administration. Nikolic's campaign has received an unexpected boost from this disappointment. Fear of returning to the past is Tadic's best hope for victory. End Comment.

MUNTER